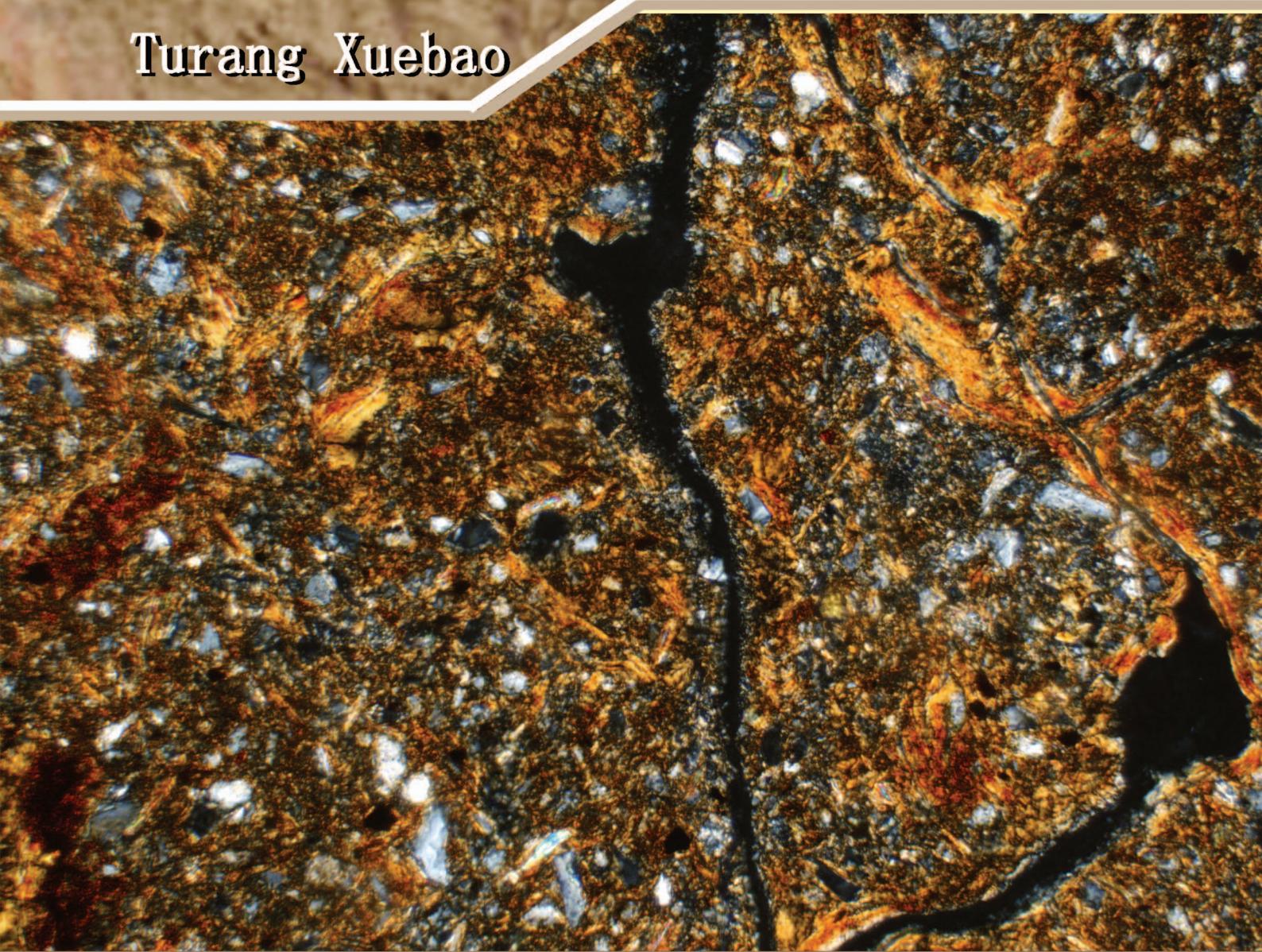


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The *Azotobacter* strains all exude organic acids, including formic acid, acetic acid, oxalic acid, succinic acid, citric acid, malic acid and lactic acid, but vary in capacity and excretion of acids. Oxalic acid and malic acid was the most common ones all the five strains could exude. K concentrations in the liquid media were significantly higher than in the control, whilst the contents of soil mineral structure K were significantly lower in the *Azotobacter* treatments than in the non-*Azotobacter* treatment. Taking into account the soil being the sole K source, it is quite obvious that *Azotobacters* could promote dissolution of mineral K in the soil. Correlation analysis shows that content of soil mineral structure K is negatively related to the total organic acids *Azotobacters* exude ( $r = -0.845^*$ ,  $n = 6$ ), but positively related to pH of the liquid medium ( $r = 0.702^*$ ,  $n = 6$ ), which indicates that both the organic acids *Azotobacters* exude and hydrogen ions could dissolve soil K. Oxalic acid is the major organic acid *Azotobacters* exude in high volume and the most competent in complexing calcium, magnesium, iron and aluminum, and moreover, it is positively correlated with total organic acid ( $r = 0.990^{**}$ ,  $n = 6$ ), which suggests that oxalic acid exuded by *Azotobacter* might contribute directly to the mobilization of soil K. Meanwhile, soil mineral K was significantly reduced in all the *Azotobacter* treatments, to a varying extent, which depended on which strain of *Azotobacter* was used in this study, because the strains of *Azotobacters* vary sharply in exudation, in terms of amount and type of organic acids they exude. The findings demonstrate that inoculation of *Azotobacters* or intercropping with legumes is a good alternative to improve plant K nutrition, besides, *Azotobacters* and legumes can also help supplement the soil with nitrogen by fixing it from the atmosphere. Therefore, more efforts should be devoted to researches on the capability of *Azotobacters* of mobilizing soil K, and their associated nitrogen and K benefits to their host plants and neighbouring plants.

**Key words** *Azotobacter*; Soil; Potassium

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